

Singer Tower
149 Broadway
New York
New York County
New York

HABS No. NY-5463

HABS
NY,
31-NEYO,
71-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
801 Nineteenth Street, N.W.
Washington, D. C.

SINGER TOWER

HABS
NY,
31-NEYO,
71-

Address: 149 Broadway, New York, New York County, New York.

Present Owner: United States Steel Company

Present Use: Now being demolished; to be replaced by a fifty-story office building, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

Statement of Significance:

One of the outstanding works of architect Ernest Flagg, the Singer Tower was for sixty years a familiar silhouette on the New York skyline. Ironically, the height of the building had established two records: in 1908 it became the tallest building ever constructed, and in 1967 it became the tallest building ever demolished. The lobby was renowned for its elegant marble and bronze decor. Perhaps most importantly, the tower exemplified Flagg's ideas on city planning, which were incorporated in part into the New York City zoning ordinances of 1916. In order to provide adequate air and light for all offices, Flagg envisaged a city of towers, in which the first five or six stories of every building would extend over the entire lot, but the upper stories would cover only one-quarter of the lot. The height of the tower would be limited only by structural considerations.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Legal description of the property: Prior to purchase by the Singer Manufacturing Company, the lots involved were numbered 12, 13, and 14. After purchase the Company's entire holdings at the corner of Liberty Street and Broadway were revised to form one lot, numbered lot one.

Date
5/1/1902
(Lot 12)
Liber 68,
page 399.

Grantor
Holcombe Elizabeth Q.
Devisee of
Freeman Vestiana
dec'd
Quackenbush Abraham
Elizabeth A.
Charles E.
Frances L.

Grantee
Singer Manufacturing
Company

5/1/1902 (Lot 12) Liber 68, page 398.	Quackenbush Lambert Alice Hermione Abraham C. Rebecca M.F.	Singer Manufacturing Company
2/17/1902 (Lot 13) Liber 68, page 159.	Greenwich Insurance Company of the City of New York	Singer Manufacturing Company
5/10/1900 (Lot 14) Liber 59, page 191.	Martin Rosa Rainsford Rainsford George D. Katherine Rosa E. Widow and heirs of George S. dec'd	Singer Manufacturing Company
12/31/1962 (Lot 1) Liber 5214, page 243	Singer Manufacturing Company	Iacovone Rose
12/31/1962 (Lot 1) Liber 5214, page 254.	Iacovone Rose	Financial Place, Inc.
3/12/1964 (Lot 1) Liber 5270, page 419.	Financial Place, Inc. (Note: conveys land only.)	United States Steel Corporation

2. Date of erection: September 19, 1906, to May 1, 1908.
3. Architect: Ernest Flagg (1857-1947) was trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and upon his return to New York in 1891 began an architectural practice which continued until his death. In addition to the Singer Tower, he designed several other buildings for the Singer Manufacturing Company, including offices at 561-63 Broadway, the Singer Building at the northwest corner of Liberty Street and Broadway, and offices in Leningrad.
4. Builder, suppliers: There was no general contractor for the building; instead, the Singer Company contracted directly with the various suppliers, which included
 Millikin Brothers, Inc., structural steel
 The Foundation Co., foundations
 John B. Rose Co., brick

Martin P. Lodge, bluestone
J. J. Spurr & Sons, limestone
New Jersey Terra Cotta Co., terra cotta
Whale Creek Iron Works, ornamental iron
Jno. Williams, Inc., ornamental bronze
H. W. Miller, Inc., plaster

5. Original plans and construction: The erection of the Singer Tower was just one part of a building program conducted from 1906 to 1908 by the Singer Manufacturing Company at their properties on Liberty Street and Broadway. In 1906 the Company owned what was then called the Singer Building, at the northwest corner of Broadway and Liberty Street, as well as the Bourne Building at 85 Liberty Street. Ernest Flagg was commissioned in 1896 to draw up plans to remodel these properties and to design two new adjoining buildings, with all buildings being connected internally by corridors. Briefly, this was his design. He designed a fourteen-story addition to the Bourne Building, to be located at 93 Liberty Street, and added new elevators in the original Bourne Building. The height of the original Singer Building was increased by four stories and its entranceway remodeled into a small window. Added on to the original Singer Building was a structure extending seventy-four feet northward on Broadway, with three bays identical to the two of the original building. The Broadway entranceway was located in the most southerly bay of the new portion, or in what became the center bay of the entire remodeled Broadway facade. Surmounting the new portion on Broadway was a tower rising to a height of 612 feet from street level. It is this "addition"--extending north on Broadway and including the tower--which is usually called the Singer Tower and which is the subject of the above and following data.
6. Notes on alterations: By 1958 the original revolving doors and the lower portion of the bronze grille were replaced with three hinged doors and two fixed glass panels, and the original skylights on each side of the roof were replaced by a single dormer window on each side. In the spring of 1947 the flagpole was removed, and the roof crestings possibly were also removed at this time. New, self-operating elevators were installed c. 1959-60, as well as new elevator doors, in order to conform to building code regulations. New shop windows and doors were installed in recent years on the ground floor, and the ground floor plan altered to provide several small shops, instead of the original two large ones. Lighting fixtures were replaced at least five times in the building.
7. Important old views:
 - a. Colored lithograph of rendering by Hughson Hawley, 1907,

J. Ottman Lith. Co., New York. Offices of the Singer Company, Inc., 30 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N.Y. (See HABS photocopy).

- b. In the Bella C. Landauer Collection at the New-York Historical Society is a negative of what appears to be the above rendering.
- c. The Public Relations Office of the Singer Company, Inc., 30 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N.Y., has an extensive file of old and more recent photographs.
- d. Photography of "Singer Bldg. & Broadway North, c. 9772, Copyright 1913 by Irving Underhill, New York." In file "N.Y.C.--Broadway--1900's," Picture Room, New York Public Library.
- e. King's Views of New York 1908 1909 includes several views of the Singer Tower with drawings and photographs of lower Manhattan (pp. 3, 24-25, 41, and cover), as well as a rendering (p. 38).
- f. A History of the Singer Building Construction edited by O.F. Semsch and many of the magazine articles in the bibliography include excellent photographs and drawings.

B. Sources of Information:

- 1. Primary and unpublished sources: The Real Estate Office, Singer Company, Inc., 30 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, retains the original architect's drawings, including plans, elevations, and details.

"XV. The Singer Building." (Typewritten, portion of an unpublished manuscript, Public Relations Office, Singer Company, Inc.)

"The Singer Building." (Mimeographed, Public Relations Office, Singer Company, Inc.)

- 2. Secondary and published sources:

"As Ye Sew, So Shall They Reap," Progressive Architecture, XLVIII (September, 1967), 170-71.

Atlas of the Borough of Manhattan, City of New York. Desk and Library Edition. New York: G.W. Bromley & Co., 1916.

Fiftieth Anniversary, Singer Building, 149 Broadway, New York, 1908-1958. Printed in U.S. (Commemorative booklet).

Flagg, Ernest. "The Limitation of Height and Area of Buildings in New York," The American Architect and Building

News, XCIII (April 15, 1908), 125-27.

"Forgotten Pioneering," Architectural Forum, CVI (April, 1957), 116-21.

King's Views New York 1908 1909. New York: The Walker Engraving Co., 1908.

Manhattan Land Book of the City of New York 1955. Desk and Library Edition. New York: G.W. Bromley & Co., Inc., 1955.

"New York's Changing Scene," Sunday News, April 1, 1955.

["The Projected Singer Building"], The Architectural Record, XIX (April, 1906), 310.

Schuyler, Montgomery. American Architecture and Other Writings, Vol. II. Cambridge, Mass: 1961, p. 436.

Semsch, O.F., editor. A History of the Singer Building Construction. Its Progress from Foundation to Flag Pole. New York: The Trow Press, 1908.

"The Singer Building, New York," Architects' and Builders' Magazine, IX (July, 1908), 429-44.

["Singer Building"], Architecture, XVIII (August, 1908), Plates LXIII and LXIV.

["Singer Building Addition"], The American Architect and Building News, XC (September 22, 1906), three plates.

Singer Manufacturing Co. The Singer Building, New York. 1912. (Pamphlet for prospective tenants.)

"Skyscraper Really a Pigmy," The New York Times, July 19, 1908.

"Tallest," The New Yorker, September 9, 1967, p. 37-38.

Thompson, T. Kennard. "Foundations for the New Singer Building," American Society of Civil Engineers, Transactions, LXIII (1909), 1-30.

C. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated:

The New York Times (index for 1906-8 under preparation).

Part II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: Built from 1906-8, the Singer prophesied modern high-rise steel construction with its

previously unmatched height of forty-one stories and the general use of glass and steel for the facade. It also exemplified Flagg's theory of city planning.

2. Condition of fabric: Undergoing demolition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Number of stories: The building, including the fourteen-story "base" and tower, is generally considered to be forty-one stories, although the upper three of these stories are housed under a mansard roof. In addition, there is a six-story lantern surmounting the tower.
2. Number of bays: The 1906-8 construction added three bays to the earlier two-bay Broadway facade built in 1897. The tower, which is square in plan, is three bays wide.
3. Over-all dimensions: The 1906-8 construction extended the Broadway facade approximately 74'-6" northward. The facade of the tower itself is set back approximately 30'-0" from the Broadway facade and extends, along with the first fourteen stories, to a depth of approximately 110'-0" from the Broadway facade.
4. Layout, shape: The general layout of the first fourteen stories is nearly rectangular, but slightly skewed due to the block shape. The tower is square in plan.
5. Foundations: Thirty-four caissons sunk ninety feet to bed rock.
6. Wall construction, finish, and color: The first three stories are of rusticated North River bluestone. The upper stories are of dark red brick laid up in English bond. There are stone belt courses at the seventeenth, eighteenth, twenty-third, twenty-fourth, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth floor levels. Limestone was used for the cut stone work.
7. Structural system and framing: For the entire building, structural steel, fireproofed by a covering of terra cotta hollow tile; five steel bays on each side of the tower. Wind bracing, consisting of heavy diagonal X-braces connected to gussets on columns at floor levels, runs up to the thirty-ninth story level.
8. Balconies: At the eighteenth, twenty-fourth and thirtieth floor levels are terra cotta balconies on each side of the facade.

9. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: A three-story, semi-circular arch, with a cartouche engraved with "Singer" in the keystone position of the architrave, forms the main entrance on Broadway. In the upper part of this arch is a fanlight with five vertical mullions and below is a bronze grille, approximately thirteen feet wide and twenty-four feet high framed by a two-story architrave in the shape of a segmental arch. The grille consists of a bar and scroll design and holds a clock with two cupids supporting the Singer medallion. The two original revolving doors were replaced by three hinged doors.
- b. Windows: Since the ground floor level was obstructed by demolition scaffolding, it could be determined only that the shop windows and doors had been remodeled from their original appearance. On the second floor level are two large windows, each with two round, steel mullions having spiral fluting which separated the single panes of glass; between the two large windows is a small single-paned window. On the third floor are two large windows, each divided by two vertical mullions with double-hung sash in each section; the small window between the larger ones has double-hung sash. Directly above these windows are two cartouches engraved with "Singer" and brackets supporting a stone balcony. From the fourth to tenth floors there are three identical bays of windows arranged in vertical strips and having stone lintels and sill and continuous stone jambs; there is a small double-hung window between the two most northerly bays. In each bay on the fourth floor are two double-hung windows. Above the sixth floor window is a stone pediment with a shell-like motif, carved panels and roundels. The ninth and tenth floor windows have low iron grilles. On the eleventh floor is a row of small windows between the brackets supporting a stone balcony with iron railing. On the twelfth floor are two small windows in each bay. On the thirteenth floor are three large stone arched-pediment dormers, each with three double hung sash, and two smaller, copper covered dormers. There also are dormers on the fourteenth floor, directly above the copper dormers of the thirteenth floor.

The window scheme on each facade of the tower is identical. From the sixteenth to thirty-fourth floors the window frames and sash are of rolled steel. The windows of the central bay are divided by two heavy, vertical mullions. The central section consists of three rows of five panes each, and a section to each side consists of three rows of three panes. Each pane measures about

two feet by three feet, and the panes are alternately hinged or fixed on the top edge. On the thirty-fifth floor are five windows between brackets which support the bowed stone balcony on the thirty-sixth floor. The corner windows of the thirty-sixth and thirty-seventh floors are framed by a single stone architrave. The central bay of the thirty-sixth through thirty-eighth floors is formed by a three-story, ornately carved stone arch with a narrower, two-story stone pedimented window within. At each corner on the thirty-eighth floor is an oval window.

10. Roof:

- a. Shape and covering: The mansard roof surmounting the first fourteen stories is covered with copper. In the tower the sloping sides of the mansard roof are covered with Maine roof slate shingles, and the flat portion of the roof is covered with self-glazed roofing tile.
- b. Cornice: A heavy stone cornice with dentil motif at the corners between the great arched windows; this same motif decorates the arches. Resting on the cornice at each corner is a large stone urn on a pedestal. Roof crestings of highly ornamented copper along the ridges and at the intersections of the roof were removed in 1947.
- c. Dormers, towers: On the thirty-ninth floor there are three round-headed dormer windows in the center and a round window at each corner. On the fortieth floor is a large dormer window which replaced a trapezoidal-shaped skylight. A six story copper lantern with round-headed windows on each side originally held a sixty foot flagpole, now removed.

C. Description of Interior

Note: Because of the demolition work being carried on at the the time of this report, it was possible to gain access only to the lobby. Therefore, except for descriptions of the lobby, the following information on the interior is based on Semsch, op. cit., and confirmed by Mr. James McCorkey, of Galbreath-Ruffin Corp., former supervisor of the building.

1. Floor plans: Ground floor: The main entrance of the east facade opens into the large lobby with a stairway on the west wall leading up to a balcony which provides access to the banking rooms on the first floor. Staircases on each side of this lead down to the basement where safety deposit boxes are located. Another stairway, immediately to the right of the main entrance, also leads up to the banking room. A row of eight elevators forms the north wall of the center section

of the lobby.

Typical floor, second through thirteenth floors: Suites of offices open off a T-shaped corridor which runs the length of the elevator bank and on into the old parts of the original building. Offices along the west side have bay windows.

Typical floor, sixteenth through fortieth floors: U-shaped corridor surrounds the tower's core, which contains elevators, rest room and stairway. Opening off the corridor are various suites of offices with movable steel partitions.

2. Stairways: In the tower, parallel stairways of cast and wrought iron are located in the central core of the tower, to the north of the elevator bank.
3. Flooring: The lobby floors are paved with marble. Concrete floors extend throughout the rest of building, covered with linoleum or carpeting.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster throughout, except for marble walls in lobby.
5. Doorways and doors: Typical offices have hollow steel doors with an upper glass panel and steel jambs. The doors and jambs were painted to simulate wood graining. Modern elevator doors were installed c. 1959-60. The original typical elevator doors consisted of three vertical panels with a wrought iron frame; the lower panel was of flat sheet iron and the upper panel of wrought iron grille work with cast brass rosettes.
6. Decorative features and trim: The most outstanding decorative feature is its richly ornamented lobby. There are two rows of eight piers, extending for the length of the lobby from the revolving doors to the west stairway. These piers are faced with Pavonazzo marble in a frame of grey Montarenti Sienna marble with corners covered with beaded bronze. At the top of each side of each pier are a bronze molding and medallion with the Singer Manufacturing Company's trademark. The pilasters along the walls of the lobby are decorated similarly. An arch springs from each side of these piers. Their intrados are decorated with ornamental plaster work of rosettes. The pendentives and drums of these bays are of richly ornamented plaster. A modern glass lighting fixture in the center of each drum replaced a flat, circular amber glass light set in a steel frame.

Along the south wall are two marble staircases leading to the original Singer Building; on the west wall a marble staircase that divides them leads to the balcony. Both have bronze railings. On the landing of the staircase on the

south wall there is a bronze-cased master clock. On the central portion of the north wall is a bank of eight elevators. Originally the doors and frames of these elevators consisted of bronze rosettes set in panels; they were replaced by modern doors.

The original decorative scheme for the rest of the building was as follows: up to and including the thirteenth floor white ceilings, tan walls, and simulated oak trim; from the fourteenth floor upwards ivory ceilings, light green walls, and simulated mahogany trim.

7. Lighting, type of fixtures: All original electrical lighting were designed by the architect; new fixtures were installed at least five times.

8. Heating: Central steam heat.

D. Site:

1. Orientation: Broadway facade faces East.

2. Sidewalks: Concrete, contiguous to building.

Prepared by Diana S. Waite
Architectural Historian
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